

Women's Department.

LONG ENGAGEMENTS.

THE DECIDED ADVANTAGES OF A PROLONGED COURTSHIP.

Cynthia Marlowe Tells Why a Long Engagement is a Drawback to Any Woman—It Anger, Uncertainty and Anxieties. Youth the Time to Marry.

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THE state of engagement is one of glamour. Everything is or ought to be as it should be. Up to the period when the first inevitable quarrel or difference of opinion occurs—these only signs of the new life of anticipated partnership with variety—the engaged ones drift together over a summer sea of poetry, laughter and song. There never were such eyes or hands or lips as they discover in each other, such loving, trusting hearts.

This is all very pretty and quite as it should be, and the best of it is that youth does not monopolize the situation. Every engagement, founded of the right basis of mutual preference, respect and sympathy, exhibits this charming, roseate picture of the world, and the world rejoices in it. Despite the cynics, human kind does most distinctly date upon youth. This is why newly engaged couples, with such continual ardor, why plays never tire of interest, and why the romance when he takes a love story is always sure of an attentive audience.

After marriage of course comes disillusionment, although with persons of romantic temperament this phase is held in abeyance, and by the way, when the romantics have plenty of money to keep them above the groveling level—sensitive natures cannot grovel with dignity and grace—they are perhaps the happiest souls to be found enjoying the doubtful compensations of married life. Their eyes are never quite opened to the dreary realities of burned soup, leaky pipes, mountainous grocery bills and untidied servants. They calmly rise above these scourings of the flesh, and from the serene heights of philosophy gaze upon the scribbles of their fellow men with piteous indifference, secure only in the selfishness of mutual love. Their engagements were unwritten blank verse, and their united existence never developed a semblance of tragedy. The romantics, however, are scant in number; more the pity, and the disillusioned ones are named legion.

Properly speaking, the engagement is merely the interval of preparation before marriage—the definite opportunity to provide wedding garments, to settle business plans, to decide upon the details of a life together. Ordinarily a year, or at furthest, two, are deemed sufficient to this end, but when the parties engaged are indefinitely on the loose, the man in the case is either a laggard in love and a dastard in deed, or else that the "fair Ellen" must be painfully lacking in character.

At any rate the long engagement, although probably first invented to suit the convenience of impetuous suitors, is a handicap drawback to any woman, more especially so to one of a lively spirit. Socially she is ostracized, in a measure, from the companionship of all other men—a being set apart, marked and labeled—yet debased, by iron-bound conventionalism, from that daily intimacy with the one to whom she is promised which her peculiar position, as well as her affectionate and sympathetic nature, prompts. Necessarily as the years go by she must feel herself just outside of the happiness she has fancied, and which her more fortunate sisters, who are married and settled, are either quailing before or facing with a brave, tranquil and wisely front. Her life and fate are too distinctly uncertain.

This state of uncertainty is perhaps the worst feature about the long engagement. It produces a wavering and vacillating condition of mind which is always deplorable. Two people are bound together by strong bonds, but, unlike the vows of marriage, they are entirely dissoluble. Either one can break the engagement at will and marry other-wise—so that being set apart and considered labeled—yet debased, by iron-bound conventionalism, from that daily intimacy with the one to whom she is promised which her peculiar position, as well as her affectionate and sympathetic nature, prompts. Necessarily as the years go by she must feel herself just outside of the happiness she has fancied, and which her more fortunate sisters, who are married and settled, are either quailing before or facing with a brave, tranquil and wisely front. Her life and fate are too distinctly uncertain.

No engagement, even under the most favorable circumstance, with everything assured, can represent complete tranquillity. It is after all but a period of trial and expectation. There is always the lurking dread that some unforeseen fate may intervene to snatch away the beloved object and render life desolate forever afterward, but this sense of insecurity is peculiar to every sort of love. The long engaged girl soon becomes the target of endless surmise from solitary relatives and friends. As the seasons change and spring and fall marry-times come around they both themselves continually with the question, "When will the wedding take place?" This becomes exceedingly annoying. She invents plausible excuses for the apparently needless delay. She shields her lover's tardiness in naming the day and steps forth as a monument of icy reluctance. This is a tax upon her resources, but she is powerless. She is a woman!

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she must submit to the order of things; she must be engaged fifty years if he so decrees.

Maximize she sees her beauty slowly waning, for nothing is so damaging to a woman's looks as anxiety, and this the long engagement undoubtedly begets. As her personal attractiveness slowly departs she loses, at the same time, that blooming consciousness of power which is its inevitable concomitant, and when this has taken flight she is but a remnant of her former self, like a balloon without ballast or a ship without provision. She hates herself. The idea of marriage after so tiresome an experience bore her. An engagement which once came under the writer's attention had lasted for sixteen long years. Originally the young woman had been a dreamer and a dreamer, but as the hopeless years crept on she finally settled down into the decorous thirties without crimps. The man, on the other hand, had gone west to make his overhauling fortune, so that he might return and wed the queen of his heart; but alas, he had suffered many long years of the path of stardust. His trusting, fanciful nature never imagined how many other girls there were to whom he had protested undying devotion. She went on trusting. Finally he grew tired of it all and came back to his first love's feet—she who had believed all of his adroit falsehoods about the postponement of their marriage from time to time, the prolongation of their engagement, and had never murmured.

They were married, prosaically enough, but what were their chances of happiness? She had waited year after year until the light of hope had almost died from her eyes, always believing that he would be loyal and true. Denying herself to all other claimants she had lived in solitude, a life which is but anticipated widowhood, equivalent to that of the separated wife, but far more insupportable and dependent, until she had become an object of conjecture, wonderment, sometimes pity. Then, at last, when marriage actually came to end her long night, those old dreams of her heart had fled. New duties were burdensome; attention to a husband's wants and whims was a bore. She had grown fastidious about many things. Trifles worried and irritated her. She was now too old; they had been separated too long to adapt themselves to each other's ways. That mutual giving and receiving sometimes seen in the marriages of younger people of contrasting disposition was impossible with them. Discord was inevitable.

I hold that the world's standard of honor upon the engagement question is all wrong; that, being only a period of trial, no cures should attach to either one for breaking an engagement from good and sufficient cause. Nor, on the other hand, should it be entered into lightly—that is where the curse lies. Men and women do so frequently display such absolute irresponsibility by entering frivolously into an arrangement which they never intend to consider seriously, and which they break at the earliest convenience, when they have tired of the novelty of it. Not infrequently the price of such lightness and flippancy becomes the cost of a precious life, when unwares a heart has become entangled in the meshes.

The engagement where love exists only on one side is an interesting study. These are often arranged by the advice of mutual friends for pecuniary reasons or for some good social cause. Suppose, for instance, that love is on the man's side only, the girl not possessing dislike, but honest respect, and perhaps kindly regard, she being merely acquiescent. The compact is made. The girl soon finds herself obliged to submit to the caresses of a man to whom her heart does not fully respond, and she rebels against this penalty. Every engaged man, save perhaps a few grandcourtiers or other less-to-be-fancied who regard the fair object of their devotion as a woman not in love. Where this regard exists it grows and grows until her former indifference has developed into active hatred, and no course is left to her save to break the engagement as speedily as possible.

She longs for release. She looks forward to marriage with dread and distrust of herself. Tragic thoughts assail her. She is willing to do anything to be free—to work, to suffer—only to be released from those bonds which have grown so galling. All men are not gentlemen, nor do they all so readily relinquish the prizes they have held in hand. It is not always so easy to break an engagement. Much is involved. Perhaps it has been announced in the newspapers; congratulations have been received; the plans and bids for a house have been accepted; the wedding cards may even be in the engraver's hands—but no matter; it must be broken at any hazard.

Again, supposing that it is the man who finds he has made an egregious mistake. He has discovered that the woman is inordinately jealous or vain or irreligious or untruthful—qualities which manifestly unfit her to become his ideal wife—and he desires to part with her. She, being in love, and perhaps the stronger nature of the two, exhibits her skill in the hysterical line, and brings such feminine tactics to bear, by way of holding him to his bargain, as make release well nigh impossible.

Could such a marriage promise happiness? From just such unions grow under startling tragedies that fill our newspapers. The ounce of prevention utilized in the breaking off of an utterly uncongenial engagement would not have been mispent. Hence I say the code of honor is faulty upon this delicate point, and yet the subject is so individual, so dependent upon a thousand little unexplainable circumstances, that regular laws can never be laid down for the guidance and protection of the uninitiated. The law of contraries sometimes appears to be the only law in such cases, for frequently the stormiest engagements proceed the calmest and smoothest of married lives.

Many honorable men, when their hearts are awakened, hesitate to address the object of their preference until their

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"visible income" is entirely assured, and therefore retire from the field unconfessed, letting concealment prey upon their noble natures. It is questionable whether such a proceeding is just and fair toward the object inspiring such regard. A woman is left in doubt thereby. She, keenly intuitive, has long since divined that his heart is here, but the words have not been spoken. And it is because he could not say, "Will you marry me?" after "I love you" that his life has been sealed, and the end is here, and he lingers long. She ponders over his strange silence, and the thought of his absence sinks deep into her heart. All other men become a mass. Only the absent one, who has never spoken, who may never speak, but whom she fervently hopes will speak some day, can win her heart's unconquered devotion. But this is an everyday story and requires no telling. Years are never reckoned in such love stories.

In my opinion, although opposed to long engagements, the duration thereof has very little to do with the question presented. The longer an engagement lasts, the more the fact remains that if it is of such quality as to have the standard of equanimity thus lowered; how could it possibly stand the wear and tear of married life? If a girl has the tact, force, adaptability, to rise and meet and anticipate her husband's requirements with sweet, womanly grace, she will make a good wife, dependent upon, no matter whether engaged for one short, rosy month—when she lives in the poetry and dream on the honey of love in life with all the glory of youth enveloping her—whether she waits twenty long, trustful years while her lover builds up a fortune sufficient to keep her in the affluence she has enjoyed in the maternal mansion.

Most men make the colossal mistake of their lives by binding a woman to them by engagement when their scheme of life is all unmade and their definite income nil. But when a man loves he must tell it, and having told it he must get an affirmative answer to amount to anything as a breeder, and having gained her consent he must hold her by an engagement until such time as he can possibly be married, or else some poacher will come trespassing upon his preserves and crush all hope forever from his heart. And so it goes! It is true to say that all men are more or less selfish, but they are more so in love than less.

CYNTHIA MARLOWE.

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Mrs. E. J. Schofield is known at her home in Providence as an editor, writer and teacher of the first rank. Several years ago her husband was editor of The



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The text was a portion of the tenth

chapter of the thirty-second of